

Proposed Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area

Conserving the Tallgrass Landscape

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to protect a unique and highly diverse area of the United States known as the Flint Hills Tallgrass Region, in eastern Kansas. Today, less than 4 percent of the once-vast tallgrass prairie remains, most (80 percent) of which lies within the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas and northeastern Oklahoma. The purpose of the proposal is to help maintain the integrity of tallgrass prairie wildlife habitat, stream water quality, and the rich agricultural heritage of the Flint Hills.

Tallgrass prairie in eastern Kansas is rapidly being lost to residential and commercial development, or through conversion to other nonagricultural uses. Such development fragments habitat and erodes the agricultural land base that is so important for sustaining wildlife populations.

The Service recognizes the importance of protecting and fostering traditional cultural values, including ranching lifestyles and economies, in concert with habitat conservation interests. Ranching has historically played a major role in preserving the tallgrass ecoregion—and by extension conserving valuable fish and wildlife habitat—through

grazing and prescribed fire. The Service hopes to play a role in keeping working ranches on the landscape while continuing to conserve habitat for wildlife and provide unique tallgrass vistas for future generations of Americans to enjoy. Currently, the Service has tallgrass conservation areas totaling 4,092 acres in Minnesota and 51,750 acres in South Dakota.

How would the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conservation easement program work?

The Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area proposal would involve a landscape-scale conservation program using conservation easements. Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between landowners and government agencies or qualified conservation organizations, which limit the type and amount of development that may take place on a property in the future. Service easements typically prohibit subdivision and commercial development activities, but allow for continued agricultural uses such as livestock grazing and haying.



The Service would purchase grassland conservation interests, in the form of perpetual conservation easements, from willing sellers only, who own property within the proposed project area. Portions of Butler, Chase, Chautauqua, Cowley, Geary, Greenwood, Elk, Lyon, Marshall, Morris, Pottawatomie, Riley, and Wabaunsee counties are in the proposed conservation area.

Unlike fee-title acquisition, under a conservation easement the land ownership and property rights including control of public access would remain with participating landowners. In addition, participating properties would remain on local tax rolls. Easement values are determined by appraisal and typically are approximately one-third of the property's full-market value.



Prairie Coneflowers



Greater Prairie-chicken

What resources would benefit from the conservation easement program?

About 90 native grass species are found in the Flint Hills, with big bluestem, little bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, eastern gamagrass, and sideoats grama the species most often associated with the prairie landscape. The 500-plus native, broadleaf, prairie plant species found in the Flint Hills are also important, not only for maintaining the ecological health of the prairie but also for providing added forage value.

Birds dependent on large, unfragmented tracts of prairie would benefit from the easement program. Benefiting species include the greater prairie-chicken, Henslow's sparrow, short-eared owl, American golden-plover, grasshopper sparrow, dickcissel, upland sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper, scissor-tailed flycatcher, loggerhead shrike, and northern harrier. Additionally, conservation of these areas would help protect the diverse assemblages of freshwater fish and mussels found in many prairie streams in eastern Kansas.

Northern Harrier
Bob Hines/USFWS

What is the next step in the process?

We want to hear from you, and to do that we will hold three public scoping meetings to provide a public forum to share ideas and issues about the proposed conservation easement program. The dates, times, and locations for these meetings will be distributed in the local and regional area. We also encourage public comment through letters, emails, individual meetings, and phone calls to the local contact as well as the regional contact (see below).

The Service, using public input, will then develop a land protection plan (LPP) and environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate the proposal to purchase conservation easements within the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area.

The draft LPP and EA will highlight the resource values of tallgrass prairie; present alternatives that address issues and concerns that we, along with our conservation partners and the public, identified; and evaluate the effects that may occur if conservation easements are determined to be viable tools for conserving habitat in this area.

The draft LPP and EA document will be distributed to those who would like to review it, and three public meetings will be held to receive comments on the document. In addition, we want to encourage everyone to write a letter, send an email, meet individually, or call the Service staff listed below. The Service will consider all comments, and then prepare the final LPP and EA.



Upland Sandpiper

How do I get involved?

The Service welcomes your questions and comments!

Whether you are an interested individual or a group representative, please do not hesitate to call, write, or request information on upcoming meetings with Service staff to discuss this proposal and your perspective on the future of the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area project.

For more information, contact:

Local Contact

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We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation—known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

